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FREE AND OPEN CHURCHES.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE PARISH CHURCH OF

STOKE-UPON-TRENT

DURING THE

CHURCH CONGRESS,

ON THE 6TH OF OCTOBER, 1875,

BY

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S E R M O N.

ST. MATTHEW xi. 5.

‘The poor have the Gospel preached to them.’



ALL who, week after week, have felt what it is to be utterly wearied with labour must many a time have thanked God for the inestimable boon of the Day of Rest ; all who have witnessed how small is the change in daily routine which that day brings about in other countries must have been deeply grateful that their lot was cast on English soil. And when the sons of English families are forced, by the changes and chances of life, to migrate to other lands, if they remain in any degree faithful to the religion of their fathers, that which they miss most is the Sunday of the old home, and the charm which breathes through the quiet hours of the consecrated day. Something at least of this charm we must all have experienced. When from the green valleys and over the pleasant fields floats the sweet music of village bells ; when through the still air, where the noise of work has ceased, each sound comes to us more fresh and clear ; when, hand-in-hand with our little ones, we walk through the green mounds where our fathers lie ; who has not delighted in the peacefulness of that hallowed leisure, in the sweetness of that unbroken rest ? None can have ever used the holy opportunities of an English Sunday, without learning to look on it as an Elim in the desert with the shelter of its overshadowing palms—as a sweet fountain whereat to quench our thirst for all high and holy things—amid this earthly wilderness of delusive images and burning sands.

And much, I think, of this refreshful influence is due to the dear old churches of England. It is one of the great blessings of our country that there is not a town or village, scarcely even a hamlet, throughout its length and breadth, which is left without its House of God. In most places these national churches are the chief centres of reverence and interest, and have stood unchanged amid a thousand changes for immemorial years. Generations have gone to rest under the shadow of their elms, and their spire, whose 'silent finger points to heaven,' has been the last sight that the village boy has seen, his last reminder of the lessons of home, as he started forth upon his journey into the world. A thousand memories make them dear to us; it is there that the pure and solemn music of human instruments and human voices has elevated and soothed us; there that we have learned to regard ourselves as beloved children in the great family of Our Father in Heaven; there that a peace which Christ giveth has fallen like the dew of God; there that we have heard the 'still small voice' whose calmness is louder than the thunders of Sinai; there that we too, like the olden Patriarch, have seen God's face and lived.

And those Common Prayers in which we worship, what a precious heritage are they! What a blessing that we are not left at the mercy of one man's feeble utterances, dictated by the narrow limits of his own individuality! No! our prayers, in their spiritual nobleness, in their exquisite simplicity, are the intensest outpouring of those many wants which the long sufferings of humanity have taught us to appreciate. In our own private prayers we must often have felt an uneasy consciousness that, after all, it might be better for us if our wishes were *not* granted; but you will find no dangerous or doubtful petition in the many litanies of this precious book. They are not *new* prayers that we offer, for they are for the most part as old as the Christian Church. It was in these prayers, and such as these, that the confessor poured out his soul in the dungeon or the catacomb. It was with these, and such as these, that the martyr uplifted his trembling hands out of the flame. And therefore these prayers—the costly legacy of their sorrows and their triumphs—are to us as the perpetual witness against our coldness and our unfaithfulness, against our divisions and our doubts. Oh, let us thank God for the Book of Common Prayer, for this 'censer of pure gold' which has gleamed in so many saintly hands, and from which, amid the storms of two

thousand years, have risen, from many a burdened and from many a holy heart, those voices of heartfelt supplication which are as incense in the hands of the Great High Priest before the Throne.

The beauty, the order, the blessedness, the significance of these Services, might well occupy our thoughts ; but our present object leads me rather to ask, how it is that with so much to hallow and brighten our English Sunday, with so much to render beautiful and dear to us our English Service, there are in these days so many thousands of all classes, of the poorer classes so many myriads, who not only cannot exclaim with the olden rapture, 'I was glad when they said unto me, we will go into the House of the Lord,' but who, from Advent to Easter, and from Easter to Advent, through all the bright calendar of the Christian year, habitually defraud themselves of the blessedness of united worship, and rarely or never so much as set foot within the House of God?

Now, the causes which affect the wealthier and more educated classes are too manifold and serious for me here to enter on, and doubtless in their measure they affect every stratum of society. But these causes do not specially influence the poor, and it is too sadly true that, in spite of so many faithful and self-denying efforts, it is the poor who are most conspicuously absent from our churches, and the poor of whom the largest multitudes live ignorant of common worship. And if the reason for this state of things be asked, I reply, without hesitation, that it is the result of habit ; and that this habit sprang from generations of neglect, during which the poorest, who should have been most welcome, were prevented, by a feeling of shame and almost of indignation, from setting foot in churches where the positions assigned to them seemed expressly intended to combine the *maximum* of humiliation with the *minimum* of advantage. And the further consequence of their thus being alienated from that which was their undoubted right, was a settled and infinitely disastrous conviction—a conviction which it may take years of anxious labour and noble self-devotion to obliterate—that the Church of England is the ally and minister of the powerful, that the Church of England, as has been urged with so much bitterness, is the Church of the rich *alone* !

And though the age when such a reproach could have been urged with any plausibility has, thank God, passed away ; yet we must, I think, acknowledge, with a blush of shame and

penitence, that no one can enter into any unrestored church of the last century, and note its construction—a construction which affords an exact illustration of the mammon-worshipping selfishness which St. James describes, and a defiant assertion of that which he so passionately reprobates—no one, I say, can enter such a church, with its ‘free seats,’ forsooth, thrust under dark galleries and into impossible corners, where none can see or hear, without admitting that the day has been when this charge appeared to be too true. And I say that it would be for any Church a shameful and a fatal charge, because it would show a total degeneracy from the spirit, an utter violation of the traditions, of the days which were nearest Christ. Look only at the life of the Lord Jesus. What meant that birth in the manger-cradle, that boyhood in the obscure village, those long years from the age of twelve to the age of thirty, of which the sole record left us is one word, and that word the ‘carpenter’? What meant the fact that He had no roof which He could call His own; not a foot’s-breadth of ownership in the world for which He died; no possession beyond the clothes He wore? Does it not mean that He wished to reveal to us for ever the blessedness of noble obscurity, the dignity of honest toil; and that, because He came to save mankind, and because the majority of men are poor, and because honourable poverty is a thing incomparably grander than sinful wealth, He voluntarily chose the low estate of the multitude;—coming to make the meanest of earth’s villages more glorious than Golden Babylon or Imperial Rome—coming to make the badge of a malefactor’s infamy the proudest ornament on the banner of armies and the diadems of kings—coming to be the friend of sinners, and to preach the Gospel to the poor?

This was the Lord of the Church. This was He whose name we bear. And as His life, so was His ministry. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ was one of its earliest utterances; ‘to the poor the Gospel is preached’ one of its most emphatic signs. And who were His chosen followers?—Galilean peasants, despised fishermen, hated tax-gatherers, ignorant artisans. Whom did He seek?—Not the world’s rank, but its obscurities; not its haughtiness, but its humilities; not its force, but its feebleness. The meek and the lowly, these He called to Him; the hungry and the thirsty, these He fed. The deformed, the suffering, the sinner, and the publican—these thronged His footsteps. He shunned not the wild rage of the demoniac; He

loathed not the white touch of the leper ; He shrank not when the tears of the penitent harlot fell fast upon His feet : He came to love those whom few had ever loved, and to love them as none had ever loved before. He was the Protector of the young, the Healer of the sick, the Friend of the fallen, the Teacher of the wandering, the Saviour of the lost ! The world had degraded womanhood ; Christ suffered its most stained daughters—whose very touch a Pharisee would have deemed to be pollution, and so much as to look at them a sin—Jesus suffered these to minister unto Him. The world had degraded childhood ; Christ ‘ flung the desecrator of its innocence, with a millstone round his neck, into the sea.’ The world had oppressed the multitude ; Christ was one of them, grew up in the midst of them, bore the name of their opprobrium, made the very meanest of them who sought Him a child of God and an heir of heaven. In His divine ministry humility and exaltation had met together, and misery and mercy had kissed each other. One thing only kindled His indignation—one thing of many names—one thing, whether you call it pride, or selfishness, or egotism, or uncharity, or exclusiveness, or contempt for others : this alone He scathed with the lightning of impassioned anger—this alone He ‘ blighted with the flash of terrible invectives.’ Yes, the voice which trembled with pity over the friendless and fallen rang with awful denunciations, rolled with terrific thunder, over those who were merciless to the sinful, or hard upon the poor.

And it was to these that He most often preached : sometimes in the free Temple, sometimes in the open Synagogue, most often of all under the blue sky, in the sweet clear air, amidst the fresh free breezes, under God’s common sunlight, of which there can be no monopoly, and which shines from Heaven alike on the evil and the good. To poor and rich alike, mingled without distinction, as they sat and listened among the mountain lilies ; to poor and rich, ranged without distinction under the flowering oleanders that fringe the pebbled strand of Gennesareth, while His boat rocked on the bright ripples of the lake ; to poor and rich alike, but to the poor in immensely preponderant numbers, as they rested, hungry and weary, on the rich grass that covers the green slopes of the farther shore ;—these were His congregations, and these His churches. The common people heard Him gladly—these He best loved ; to these it was most needful that He should preach.

And why? Because in God's infinite presence the paltry distinctions of human precedence are altogether ridiculous—because to be a Christian is much loftier than to be a king. Yes, in the light of the Incarnation and the Resurrection the very humblest life is transfigured as with a glory from Heaven, and man as man, apart from every external accident of wealth or intellect, becomes a holy and a royal thing. We on earth attach vast value to trifles which perish in the using, often merely heaping our honour upon the dishonourable, and our flattery upon the base; but 'one second and the angels alter that,' and God sees no soul but as in its nakedness, unstripped of the thick clay of its earthly endowments, it shall stand pale and trembling before His awful bar. And I say boldly, that the entire history of true Christianity has been in accordance with these high lessons. Just as the Lord Jesus, when He rejoiced in spirit, said, 'I thank Thee, O Father, that Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes,' even so St. James says, 'Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom?' and St. Paul even glories that 'Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of this world to confound the things which are mighty . . . that no flesh should glory in His presence.' The jailer of Philippi, the runaway slave of Colossæ, these were the converts which Christ's first missionaries won. The divine words which stirred up their holy ardour and indomitable faith, were written by hands that clanked in the fetters of a prison, or were soiled with labours of the mine. They worshipped in the garret or the catacomb; they died by the wild beast or the flame. All this was the sneer of their enemies; but it was the boast and the glory of a Church which regarded it as the very charter of her existence to be allied with the love of God against the tyrannies of man, and whose Founder had made it her very mission to preach the Gospel to the poor.

And for many a century, amid many failings, she yet continued, on the whole, faithful to that high mission. It was at her altars that the slave was emancipated. It was to her sanctuaries that the persecuted fled. It was only in her monasteries that the oppressed were safe. It was only in her communion that, in an age when there was a wellnigh fanatical reverence for rank and strength, the poorest, the

meanest, the feeblest could, and often did, by knowledge, by wisdom, by piety, rise to a position loftier than that of kings. It was she alone who dared to maintain the essential equality of all men in the sight of God, and to strike down the mailed arm of the baron when it was lifted to outrage his vassal or his serf. Alliance with man's suffering, union with man's feebleness, the care of the many—who are and must ever be the poor—this in all ages has been the chief source of her nobility, the main secret of her strength.

And, amid the numberless corruptions and apostasies of the Church of Rome, she has never quite lost sight of this great truth. In this matter—we must blush and grieve to say it—but in this matter her services have been truer, her ideal has been loftier, than ours. In two respects we may well learn of her. The one is this—that her churches stand always open. It is true that the sincere worshipper may anywhere worship the Father in spirit and in truth; may everywhere and in every place lift holy hands, without wrath or doubting, in the home or by the roadside, in the secret chamber as in the crowded street. Yet undoubtedly the associations of worship do tend to hallow and solemnise our souls; they do tend to exclude the dreams of self-interest and the images of sin; they do inspire, by imperceptible influence, the vast conceptions of death, judgment, and eternity. And it is a delightful thing in foreign countries to turn aside, in the cool morning, or at the burning noon, or when the shades of evening begin to fall, through church-doors that stand ever open, and there to forget for a moment the cares and troubles and temptations of the world, and pray to God that He would keep us day by day in safety and without sin. Yes, it is a happy and beautiful thing in such imperishable structures for worship as are the splendid legacy to ages of faithlessness from an age of faith, in the many-coloured light that streams from painted windows, and under the cool fretted aisles, among silent and scattered worshippers, to kneel down—the happy to thank God for their prosperity, and the sorrowful to implore for aid in their afflictions. And not only are these fair churches always open, but all ranks are mingled there without distinction. I have seen princesses of the noblest houses kneeling side by side with poor peasant-women, who simply placed their basket on the floor beside them as they returned from market. I have seen the mother lead in her little ones by the hand, and the aged beggar bow his white hairs, and the busy rich man kneel down for a few moments

to remind himself that there are in this world things higher than the greed of gain ; and thus I have seen men and women, I will not say uninjured, but even ennobled by the contact, where all can pray the more sincerely and the more fervently, from the feeling that they are all praying together as simple men and women, fellow-sinners at the Throne of Grace, separated indeed by distinctions at once evanescent and insignificant, but united by all the truest and most eternal certainties, united by ' the common mysteries of life and death, the common mysteries of redemption and immortality, the common mysteries of corruption and the grave.'

And why, alas ! is all this otherwise in England now ? It is not so, it never has been so, in our theory ; why is it so in our practice ? In our theory, the greatest queen who ever ruled this realm is in the Church's Service known only as ' this woman ;' and the grandest emperor who ever wore a crown has no other title than ' this man.' But in the bad practice which has sprung up in the last few generations, we distinctly violate the law of God, by giving the good places to the men who wear the gold ring and the gay clothing, and saying to the poor, ' Stand thou there ; or sit here under my footstool.' And this bad practice, which is comparatively but of yesterday, arose, I imagine, something in this way. A weak miserable king, succeeding the glorious Elizabeth, did much to enfeeble and degrade the national character. Then the nation was agitated by the Civil War ; then, in frightful reaction from that narrow intolerance which marred the nobleness of the Puritans, all England broke loose in the foul orgies of the Restoration ; then began that eighteenth century—that century of ' the trifling head and the corrupted heart,' when vice flaunted in the highest places, shameless and unreprieved, and a godless philosophy seemed to have won its final triumph. In those days of our fathers the Church of England was miserably corrupted and shamefully asleep. But then came a revival. When God has a great work to do, He calls forth His servants, and anoints them thereto with the hands of invisible consecration. Voices of a holy indignation shook the world. Undaunted amid the storm of blasphemy, John Wesley and George Whitfield stood forth in the daring simplicity of the Gospel, to shame into decency and startle into repentance a greedy and polluted age. And when, once more, in spite of the dead stagnation and arrogant selfishness, men were found to preach the Gospel to the poor—when Whitfield

preached that Gospel to 20,000 poor miners at the Kingswood Collieries, and to London artisans in St. Giles's Fields—when the ignorant and often degraded thousands stood around him, hushed, awe-struck, trembling, weeping, like Israel at Sinai—when he spoke to men till their hearts were touched, and their consciences were softened, and the streaming tears left white unwonted furrows down their blackened cheeks—and when, in spite of a violence too often, alas! connived at, if not condoned, by clergymen and magistrates, the poor flocked to him in myriads, and listened, and blessed God—then once more it came home to men's drugged and drowsy consciences, that the arm of God was not shortened, that the Word of God needed but free course to be glorified. It was as if a voice had uttered, 'Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' And they did live, and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great army; and once more, in a selfish society, in a faithless century, to the poor the Gospel was preached.

Time fails me to continue the tale; but, thank God, since then the work has gone on and prospered. Everywhere our mouldering cathedrals have been restored. Everywhere our crumbling churches are being embellished. Everywhere these selfish, unsightly pews are being swept away. Everywhere the Church of England, awakened from her fatal and sinful lethargy, is striving to rekindle the smouldering embers of religious warmth which, in the vast labouring masses of our towns and villages, have lain so long half-choked under the white ashes of their neglect. Everywhere the poor are being affectionately invited, urged, allured to worship—not in mean edifices, in which, in seats satirically called 'free,' because none care to take them, they shall be thrust away out of sight, under dark galleries, and in far-off corners, but in fair churches, their own no less than ours by legal right—where, in seats as unappropriated as that river of the grace of God which the Gospel offers, high and low, rich and poor, one with another, we may all meet as equal friends and equal brothers, in the great family of God—all of us in God's sight equally sinful, yet all of us in God's sight equally redeemed. In such works, in such movements, rests, I deliberately believe, the main hope for the Church of England. She has put her hand to the plough, and must not look back. May we, may you, even if it be by nothing better than a repression of our own selfish interests, and an abandonment of our own obstructive principles, have a share in the task,

however humble. It may be too late. It may be God's will that, after centuries of prosperity and calm—after centuries, alas ! of much stagnation and worldliness—our great and beloved Church may be doomed once more to long and dreary years of struggle and affliction. It may be that God would purge from our souls, and above all from the souls of the Clergy, all dross of hypocrisy and worldliness, and leave in the furnace of affliction nothing but the refined gold. It may be so ; but if it be so, if it be too late now to avert the danger, what in that hour shall be her strength ? What shall win for the Church of England the gratitude, the loyalty, the devotion of the people whose souls are in her charge ? Not assuredly her wealth, that may be appropriated ; not her social honours, they may be torn away ; not her connection with the State, that may be very suddenly and very rudely snapped : no, not these, but her love, her energy, her fearlessness, her charity, her faith, her works. Of these works none is a more noble or a more important work than this—that the worship of the Church should henceforth be, as it ought to be in every parish church, by law, by right, and by the distinct utterance of Holy Scripture, not in name only, but in reality, a free and open worship ;—the work that they who minister therein should, with quiet minds and thankful hearts, be able, not in name only, but in reality, to preach the Gospel to the poor.





